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Author(s): Tom Greggs

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**Legitimizing and Necessitating Inter-faith Dialogue:  
The Dynamics of Inter-faith for Individual Faith Communities**

Dr Tom Greggs

University of Chester

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Address: Department of Theology and Religious Studies,  
University of Chester,  
Parkgate Road,  
CHESTER,  
CH1 4BJ.

Tel: 01244 511038  
01244 511031 (secretary)

Fax: 01244 392779

E-mail: [t.greggs@chester.ac.uk](mailto:t.greggs@chester.ac.uk)

Legitimizing and Necessitating Inter-faith Dialogue:  
The Dynamics of Inter-faith for Individual Faith Communities<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

In an age in which religion is a burning issue in the geo-political sphere, the need for peoples of different religions to engage in inter-faith dialogue may seem clear; what is less clear is whether there is legitimacy for and imperative to members of individual faith communities to engage with the religious other on the exclusive grounds of their individual faith. This article thus seeks to advocate that theology done in the service of individual faiths needs as a priority to engage in legitimizing and necessitating dialogue with the religious other as the *religious* other. The article considers the grounds on which exclusivist religious people can undertake inter-faith dialogue. Looking to the need to attend to particularity and the genuine otherness of the religious other, the article advocates that faiths should begin to understand what it is internal to their traditions that makes inter-faith dialogue a necessity for intense and particular religious self-identity. Members of faith communities need to be legitimated on terms internal to their community and by leaders of their community to engage in dialogue with the other: they need to know not only how to engage with the other but also *why* to engage with the other. Considering the particular tradition of Christianity, the article attends to these themes by seeking hints from scripture and Christ regarding why a Christian should engage with the religious other in order to be more intensely Christian.

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**Key words:** inter-faith; exclusivism; particularity; scriptural reasoning; pluralism

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I. Introduction

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Canon Prof. Anthony C. Thiselton who read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper, and the anonymous referees of this article for their helpful comments.

Inter-faith dialogue involves all of the complexity of human interaction. Dialogue is not the same as papers written which state a position with the final full-stop in place; but instead involves person to person, face to face engagement with the other.<sup>2</sup>

Dialogue involves speaking and listening, leading and being led, shaping and being shaped. It is not a series of monologues, nor is it a sermon or lecture. Dialogue is not simply bi-directional (I speak-you listen), but is, instead, complexly multi-directional (I speak-you listen-You speak-I listen-I rethink-I speak again etc.). It is not simply cognitive and theoretical, but fully personal and human. Dialogue is not only about the other with whom we dialogue; it is also about ourselves. In dialogue, we should not simply expect the other to be changed (if at all), but ourselves to be transformed: what one brings to dialogue is secondary to that which one takes from dialogue with the other.

Thus, this article concerns the dynamics of inter-faith dialogue and considers the purpose of such dialogue. Put in its sharpest form, the article asks two questions: ‘Why should religious people engage in inter-faith dialogue?’ and ‘What does inter-faith dialogue seek to achieve?’. The focus of this article is, therefore, concerned with the step prior to engagement in inter-faith dialogue (in whatever form) and the mechanics of practices, and is concerned with the thinking prior to articulations of theologies of religions. Its concerns surround the reasons why religious people of any one faith tradition should be at all concerned to engage with members of any other religious community. Underlying the argument in this article are many of concerns addressed by Paul Ricoeur,<sup>3</sup> whose thought has been particularly utilized in the field of theologies of inter-faith engagement by David Ford; and it would be an interesting avenue for another occasion to pursue the matters discussed herein further in relation to the thinking of Ricoeur, Lyotard, Levinas and Jauss. However, the focus of this article is more specifically not only the legitimacy of people of any one religious tradition engaging with any other, but also whether one can speak of the necessity of such engagement to be genuinely and more fully people of an individual faith community. In an age in which religion is a burning issue in the geo-political sphere, the need for peoples of different religions to engage may seem clear; what is less clear

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<sup>2</sup> For more on facing, see David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 17-44.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

is whether there is legitimacy for and imperative to members of individual faith communities to engage with the religious other *on the exclusive grounds of their individual faith*. This article thus seeks to advocate that theology done in the service of individual faiths needs as a priority to engage in legitimizing and necessitating dialogue with the religious other primarily as the *religious* other (rather than singularly as the political other), in recognition that full expressions of any one faith may well involve a sensitivity to and a positive attitude towards members of other faith commitments.

This article asserts that the effects of inter-faith dialogue on oneself need to be brought back to the individual religious community. However, it argues this cannot be in such a way as to undermine the particularity and integrity of an individual community, but needs to be done in a manner which allows that community more genuinely to become the community of faith it already is. Practitioners of inter-faith should bring what they learn through dialogue back to the faith community of which they are a part, but do so in a way that engages on terms *internal* to that community. By this is meant that the internal reasoning of an individual tradition should be employed to legitimize and necessitate engagement with another tradition. Members of faith communities need to know not just how to engage with the other but *why* to engage with the other – why it is a priority, and how an individual tradition can and does provide the resources for it to be a priority. Clearly this will be different for different faith communities, and for some it will not even be an issue. However, this fact does not undermine the need for faiths to engage on the basis of their own particularities. That inter-faith dialogue may not be an issue that needs legitimizing for some communities may actually underscore the need for particularity – a particularity that recognizes some traditions will not see the need for this engagement *on the basis of particularity* as essential to their own individual particularity. The central point of this article is simply this: it is incumbent on individual faith communities and traditions to engage in dialogue with others on the basis of their individual particularity. Put concretely, a Christian should engage with a Muslim on the basis of Christianity; a Muslim with a Christian on the basis of Islam. This is not only because in this one sees genuine inter-*faith* dialogue, but also because legitimacy for engaging with the other (which can at times be difficult and seem counter-intuitive to one's own tradition) must be grounded on the basis of one's own tradition.

## II. Diagnosing Some Possible Problems

The concerns of this article arise from an awareness of three possible problems with the present situation.

1. The first is that faith communities do not *need* the religious other, and inter-faith dialogue is not seen as a high priority for many communities. Faced with running buildings and finances, practising individual religious rites, clarifying a sense of individual and collective identity within a complexly religious and secular society, (in the instance of diaspora communities) dealing with issues concerning being a religious minority, and (at least in Western Europe) contending with the onslaught of secularism,<sup>4</sup> individual religious communities in the present generation have enough to contend with without engaging with members of other faith communities, who similarly have plenty of other priorities that seem higher than inter-faith dialogue. One can see how a vicious cycle can ensue. Moreover, many religious communities (especially monotheistic faiths) understand themselves to be exclusive, and to engage and dialogue with the religious other would be a denial or betrayal of that exclusivity:<sup>5</sup> inter-faith might be seen to undermine particularity or to relativize a uniquely considered or revealed perspective on the divine. Individual communities and faith members can fear the pollution of the outsider that may reduce the integrity of their community and, instead of bringing dialogue between two others, create a *tertium quid*. These concerns often lead to an alienation between religious communities, and at worst can lead to various forms of violence. This violence is not only in terms of terrorist acts carried out in the name of individual religious communities, but also in terms of the antagonism that can exist at localized levels

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<sup>4</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of secularization, see David Martin, *The Religions and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); David Martin, *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith and the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Although this paper speaks in rather general terms (at this point), it is written by a Christian living in the west and, therefore, betrays the concerns of one living as a western Christian. These concerns will no doubt be put differently by others. While it may seek to consider shared problems, along with MacIntyre it is aware that shared problems do not provide traditions with 'a neutral standard in terms of which their respective achievements can be measured. Some problems are indeed shared. But what importance each particular problem has varies from tradition to tradition, and so do the effects of failing to arrive at a solution.' Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 348.

between, for example, mosques and churches that are located on different sides of the street. What compounds these problems is that many of those involved in inter-faith dialogue or in theologies of religions are often so concerned with the good and proper work that they are doing that they are distanced from those of their own religious communities who see the religious other as insurmountably different from themselves: for many of those engaging in inter-faith theology and dialogue, the complexities of doing this work alongside the religious other (perhaps inevitably) leads them to focus on the religious other rather than reforming members of their own faith community; they run the danger of being primarily identified as members of an inter-faith community rather than (or at least only secondarily) members of an individual faith community.

2. The second possible problem lies with the fact that exclusivist members of faith communities often perceive that which unites those engaged in inter-faith dialogue as being some form of liberalism that exists *external* to the claims and traditions of individual faith communities.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the liberal practitioner of an individual religion is seen by more conservative and exclusivist members of the faith community to be an outsider to the very community of which they claim a part. Liberals come to be seen not as a fully genuine and authentic part of the community by exclusivists, but are instead identified primarily as ‘liberals’ and only secondarily as members of a faith community, who read and interpret their faith through their external liberal framework: at least in Christian parlance, ‘liberal’ can be used pejoratively by conservative (or self-perceived genuinely authentic) members of the community. The dialogue between such liberals is seen as no dialogue at all by exclusivists, and at worst can actually become that – seeking agreement and commonality between religions around a lowest common denominator between faiths.<sup>7</sup> Such dialogue is seen as symptomatic of the pluralistic approach to religion in modernity which fails to recognize distinction, particularity and exclusivity by imposing the universal category of ‘religion’ onto all individual faiths, and seeing each individual religion as merely one instantiation of the generalized universal; one sees this throughout secular

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 326-348.

<sup>7</sup> One sees this, for example, in John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), who prefers to speak of ‘the Real’ as opposed to ‘God’ so as to include non-theistic religions (pp. 10f.); cf. John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 39-44.

critiques of religion, such as those by Feuerbach, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. This brings with it the further problem that those who meet to engage in inter-faith dialogue are often not the ones who need to: liberals are not going to engage in physical violence against the religious other (albeit they may engage in violence to the otherness of the other, by seeing the other as the same); it is exclusivists who most need to meet the religious other in face-to-face dialogue. Clearly, this does not mean that all exclusivists will engage in violence towards the other. It simply means that it is from the extremities of exclusivist forms of communities that fundamentalisms arise. Theologies of the religions and proponents of inter-faith dialogue need to engage these problems, and direct an imperative towards exclusivist practitioners of faiths to engage in inter-faith dialogue which is legitimized and necessitated on that practitioner's own terms.

3. Third and related, the recognition of the importance of inter-faith dialogue for the present situation of discord globally and in localized communities seemingly stemming from religion determines that there are public and political dimensions to inter-faith dialogue and theologies of the religions. This leads to the need for those engaged in inter-faith work to transcend the normal categories and manner of theological engagement (be it the seminar, academic article or technically framed monograph) and to recognize the implications of theology for political decisions: the audience for theologians of the religions is not only the academy or the individual community of faith, but also the *polis*. This is because the out-working of inter-faith dialogue may hope to involve as a by-product community cohesion and peace between the nations. If, however, inter-faith dialogue is to be pursued for the public good, the very people who would most benefit from engagement in it are those for whom it is most difficult – those who do not understand themselves as within or a part of liberal pluralism. Moreover, while inter-faith dialogue has political implications, it cannot be engineered or directed by the state, but should – to engage those who need most strongly to be engaged – arise from *within* the community of faith. To engage those whose primary identity is their individual religion (before their sense of nationstatehood or liberal democracy), it is necessary to engage on the basis of exclusivist and conservative elements of each faith to legitimize dialogue with the religious other, and to direct the faith community to the religious other. Directives from external secular powers will only undermine an individual faith's sense of its



own internal authority, and will lead conservative factions again to fear that the inter-faith project results in the reduction of any one particular faith to a bland common religion understood only from an outsider, secular perspective: religion becomes the religion of the enlightenment, tolerated by the state only inasmuch as it is not too fervent. In this, there is a difficult balance to strike. The state clearly sees the importance of inter-faith dialogue; I have been struck by this as an active member of a political party in my own conversations with politicians, and the excitement that even the most secular among them have about the virtue of inter-faith programmes and projects. However, the impetus for this work cannot come from the politicians: the impetus must come from within faiths themselves.

In light of this diagnosis, this article advocates that one major priority for inter-faith dialogue is the reformation of individual faith communities to make them more fully the community their faith calls them to be. Dialoguing with the religious other leads one back to one's own individual faith community and identity, and the need to engage in a reconciling reformation and transformation of the self, in light of the other, *in order to make any one faith community more genuinely itself*. By this is meant that meeting with the religious other should lead members of a faith community back to their own community. It should lead to rethinking one's own identity in light of the religious other in order truly and more intensively to become oneself. So, for example, a Christian engaging in dialogue with a Muslim should seek to understand how to frame that dialogue for herself in light of the Christian faith, and how to engage in that dialogue in a manner that does not undermine Christian identity but reinforces and allows for deep and intense Christian identity,<sup>8</sup> a depth of identity that would not be possible without that dialogue with the Muslim. So deep may this identity become that it may necessitate communication with other Christians in order that they, too, can become even more overtly, deeply, intensely and particularly Christian. In this way, inter-faith is enabled to become central to being exclusively and intensely Christian, leading even conservative Christians to engage in dialogue in order to be genuinely Christian, leading them to dialogue with the religious other in order to fulfil their Christian calling. This is the virtuous cycle that needs to

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<sup>8</sup> See Ben Quash, "'Deep Calls to Deep': Reading Scripture in a Multi-Faith Society", in L. Bretherton and A. Walker, eds, *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), pp.108-130.

undermine the potential vicious cycles above. While clearly one cannot presume that all members of all faith communities will have this as a primary concern (there will be other non-competing reasons for engaging also), the concern to be genuinely and fully a member of a faith community is innate to all who understand their identity as related to their faith commitment. The basic argument of this article is, therefore, that faiths should begin to understand what it is internal to their tradition that makes inter-faith dialogue *a necessity for intense and particular religious self-identity*: what is there in Christianity, Islam, Judaism and all other faiths that determines that engaging in inter-faith dialogue would make a practitioner more Christian, Muslim, Jewish and so on respectively? In seeking to discover this, we can begin to undermine the potential problems of inter-faith dialogue diagnosed above, and recognize the need for inter-faith dialogue on conservative or exclusivist terms for the good of the world but motivated entirely from within individual faiths.<sup>9</sup>

This article will engage these concerns by examining how practitioners of inter-faith dialogue need to recognize the importance of the dynamic of turning back to their faith communities and engaging in *intra-faith* dialogue with those fearful of inter-faith endeavours. Practitioners need to do this in order to engage those for whom it would be most beneficial to be involved in inter-faith, and this is thus to be done on the basis of traditions and teachings internal to individual faiths. The article will then model some theological ‘hints’ in terms of how this might be done from the perspective of the individual faith position of the author – Christianity.

### III. The Purpose of Inter-faith Dialogue: Changing ourselves and not the other

To solve some of the problems with dangerous theo-politics, it is necessary in the first instance to engage in the *theo* aspect of the theo-political. Problematic elements of individual traditions’ self-expressions require being dealt with in terms internal to the tradition itself. Faced with this, the practitioner of inter-faith has a dual agenda. By engaging with the religious other, the practitioner of inter-faith is in dialogue with other religious traditions. But, by engaging in the activity of dialogue with the

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<sup>9</sup> This argument may well be able to be shared, furthermore, by others who do not understand themselves as exclusivist. See, for example, J. A. DiNoia, ‘Christian Universalism: The Nonexclusive Particularity of Salvation in Christ’ in C. E. Braaten & R. W. Jenson, eds, *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (London: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 37-48.

religious other, practitioners of any individual faith are also in dialogue with the particular tradition of their own faith. This is the way in which the transformative nature of inter-faith dialogue can become reformatory for the individual communities of those who engage in it. For practitioners of inter-faith dialogue to make a difference in the public realm, there may be a need to engage in reparative reasoning in relation to one's own tradition, looking deeply within one's own tradition to resource a repair of it,<sup>10</sup> in this instance in terms of the relationship between one's own tradition and other religious traditions. This repair is not an engagement in changing a particular community into something new or different; it is, instead, an engagement in making that community more genuinely and truly the community it claims to be by seeking to repair its reasoning from within. Practitioners in inter-faith should make reformation of their own tradition a priority in order to legitimize the practice for other members of their community on the basis of their own particular tradition. Better still, they should seek to use their tradition in order to understand engagement with the other as a priority.

There is certainly a level of 'chicken and egg' about this: one needs to engage with the religious other in order to recognize the transformative nature of that engagement to lead one back to one's own tradition in order to legitimize that engagement with the religious other, so that others too feel they can engage in it. However, this cyclical model of inter-faith engagement, which leads one back to reformation of one's own community and in turn leads one to transformation in face to face dialogue with the other, has the potential to become a further virtuous cycle, with the possibility of bringing healing in the public realm. Engaging in inter-faith with an attentiveness to this intra-religious dialogue brings about the possibility of engaging those who do not feel comfortable in the practice of inter-faith, those who are fearful of meeting around a shared common principle (such as liberalism). In short, engaging in this way determines an engagement with those internal to one's tradition who need to engage with the other, and it determines that this is done on their terms in a manner which recognizes the exclusive claims of religious traditions.

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<sup>10</sup> See Nick Adams, 'Making Deep Reasoning Public', *Modern Theology* 22:3 (2006), 385-401, esp. at 400f. For further performances of this practice, see Peter Ochs, 'Abrahamic Theo-politics: A Jewish View' in Peter Scott & William T. Cavanaugh, eds, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 519-534; and Quash, 'Deep Calls to Deep' in Walker and Bretherton, eds, *Remembering Our Future*.

This means that there is a clear need for practitioners of inter-faith dialogue or theologies of the religions to think in terms of the prior step to do these activities. The term ‘reformation’ is appropriate to this activity. In order to engage those who feel that this practice is alien to a tradition, it is necessary to look back into the tradition to search for an imperative to engage in inter-faith in light of the politics of today. By reaching deeply into each individual tradition, it may be possible to reach more clearly out to others in reconciliation and to see the reasons for doing so. This is not about changing those others, nor indeed completely changing ourselves, but it is rather about reforming ourselves in order to be truly who we should be in light of the religious other. But how is it that we might begin to do this?

#### IV. Meeting around Scripture

Clearly, the manner in which different traditions approach this need will be various depending on the tradition.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, even within Christianity, different traditions will engage variously dependent on the way in which authority operates within their tradition: while exclusivist Protestant traditions might look to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, for the Roman Catholic Church, the magisterium will also need to be considered. This does not mark a denial of the argument that follows, however. It is, instead, a recognition of the complexity involved in the enterprise of legitimizing and necessitating inter-faith dialogue. Nevertheless, from a western perspective, living in a world in which there seems (at least from the presentations of the media) to be considerable discord between members of the Abrahamic faiths at this time determines that there is a need for engagement between people who understand their exclusivities (variously) from the perspective of their scriptures.<sup>12</sup> The key to legitimizing and even necessitating inter-faith dialogue on exclusivist grounds for people of the Book surely lies within the teaching of those very sacred books. In the contemporary geo-political situation, for Muslims, Jews and Christians to engage with members of other faith communities, it would be beneficial for them to do so on the grounds of biblical or Quranic imperative. In this way, it is not at the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 348.

<sup>12</sup> The status of the scriptures of each of these traditions clearly varies both internal to the traditions and between them: for Christianity the Word is supremely seen not in the Bible but in the incarnate Jesus.

behest of an external secular power nor at the conformity to an external intellectual movement that a member of these communities engages in inter-faith dialogue. It is, instead, on the exclusive basis of one's own religious tradition.

For me, this realisation has arisen from my involvement over the last few years in Scriptural Reasoning. I am far from expert in this discipline and much more worthy ink than my own has already been spilt on the practice.<sup>13</sup> What I wish to consider, however, is the effects of this practice on my own prior step to engaging in inter-faith dialogue. In this, I have been led to consider the issues that are at the centre of this article: on what exclusively Christian grounds am I to pursue this practice of reading scripture with the Abrahamic other? Clearly, meeting around my own scriptures with these others has led me to look with new perspectives on my own biblical texts.

However, what fascinates me most in this enterprise is my own personal reading of the Christian scriptures in light of engaging in the practice of reading those scriptures alongside another – the way in which this has enabled me to see the legitimacy and necessity of engagement with the other (ironically) *on the exclusive grounds of my own revelational exclusivity*. It has been through dialoguing with the other that I have been led to face questions of the legitimacy and necessity of doing so. Engaging in the practice as a result of the pressing political situation in the West and a belief in the Christian imperative to peace, I have found it necessary simultaneously to seek the legitimacy of such a practice on the basis of my theology. As a theologian who takes the uniqueness of Christ, scripture and the creeds as the foundations for my speech about God, I am not someone who finds inter-faith dialogue natural or easy. I engage in it because of the importance of the activity for a theology which recognizes its role in the public sphere. But, to retain my integrity as a theologian, that public theology should correspond to my private thinking. Meeting around scripture has allowed this two-way engagement to take place: by reading with members of another faith community, I have been led by their otherness back to my own faith community. However, this has not been in a way to make my community any less particularly or intensely Christian, but to make it more fully particular and intense in its identity as Christian. Meeting with the other has simultaneously determined the need to reflect

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<sup>13</sup> On the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, see David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 273-303; David F. Ford and C.C. Pecknold, eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006); and David F. Ford, 'God and Our Public Space: A Scriptural Wisdom', *International Journal of Public Theology* 1:1 (2007), 63-81 at 71-73.

on the theological legitimacy of engaging with the religious other. What has amazed me most of all in this is that, having sought legitimacy for this dialogue, I have found the necessity of it – a necessity grounded in the very basis of being a Christian.

This is an issue I have not only faced as a lecturer in the academy, but also as a preacher in the pulpit. Meeting with the other has led me back to reforming myself and my community in order more truly to be the community we are called to be. This involves as a preacher not only legitimizing the practice of meeting with members of other faith communities, but also urgently calling from the pulpit for the necessity of this – not on political or secular grounds, but on exclusively biblical and theological grounds. Moreover, engagement with the Abrahamic other around the practice of scriptural reasoning has led to a heightened awareness in my own reading of the Christian bible of the place of the religious other within the gospel narrative.

Describing experiences of scriptural reasoning to secular people (including some politicians), I have witnessed the fascination with the idea that this provides the possibility of religious people engaging with each other ‘on their own terms’, and that solutions to the local and global problems between members of faith communities might actually be found within the very particularities of the communities themselves. The ability to explain and interpret one’s own religious text to and with members of other faith communities has the potential to include even the most conservative, orthodox, or (in terms most often expressed by secularists) fundamentalist of believers; and it does so on the basis of their particularity and on their agenda. The excitement about this has led Toynbee Hall in London to engage in a pilot scheme for young people called ‘Justext’. This has been run in a youth worker format and explored in schools. The feasibility of curriculum development within schools is presently being considered, as a way of recognizing the religious particularity and commitments of students within RE syllabuses which often present individual religious traditions next to one another as relativized individual instantiations of a universal human phenomenon, or else treat religions thematically seeking consensus and agreement around a common core or lowest common denominator. An interesting feature of these early discussions has been the recognition of the need to legitimize students (and, because students, parents also) to engage in such a practice. Indeed, this awareness of issues of legitimacy is reflected in the adult practice of this kind of inter-

faith dialogue on the London based Scriptural Reasoning website, which states that the material has been developed and run under the Jewish *halachic* and Islamic *shari'a* supervision of the London Beth Din and the Fatwa Committee of the Islamic Cultural Centre and London Central Mosque respectively.<sup>14</sup> The need to engage in intra-faith legitimisation as the prior step to inter-faith dialogue is clear.

But, how is it that these exclusive traditions can be used to legitimize and necessitate engagement and dialogue with the other? What are the concrete outworkings of the theological reflection thus far?

#### V. Some hints for one particular community: looking to Christ to understand Christianity and the other

In line with the programmatic purpose of this article, the above questions can only be answered from the particular perspective of any one religious tradition for that particular tradition. Written by a protestant Christian, this article seeks to consider these issues by attending to the protestant Christian tradition. Moreover, in keeping with the purpose of this essay, this legitimizing and necessitating of inter-faith dialogue will be done on the basis of the exclusive claims of the Christian tradition – that is by attending to its scriptures, creeds, christology and trinity. This is a way of saying that those very particular things which divide Christianity from other religious communities may be utilized to resource legitimizing dialogue. This is hardly a new practice, and many academics have found resources for legitimizing engagement with the other within the trinitarian nature of the Christian tradition,<sup>15</sup> or the Christian doctrine of God,<sup>16</sup> or the christological focus of Christian theology,<sup>17</sup> or

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<sup>14</sup> The website of The Scriptural Reasoning Society, <<http://www.scripturalreasoning.org.uk/>> [accessed 26 February 2008].

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2000), pp. 167-180; and Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> For example, David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987)

<sup>17</sup> For example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-1975), vol. IV, pt. 3, §69.1 & 2. Henceforth, *Church Dogmatics* is cited as volume/part, page (e.g. I/2, 3 etc.), and referred to as CD. Cf. George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 234-280; and Geoff Thompson, 'Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine and Karl Barth', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 8:1 (2006), 3-24.

pnematology,<sup>18</sup> or the Christian wisdom,<sup>19</sup> or Christian scripture.<sup>20</sup> This article in no way seeks to displace such work. It seeks rather to supplement it and to accentuate the place for necessitating and legitimizing inter-faith dialogue for those who find it difficult to engage in it given their exclusivist commitments to their own traditions. Written by a preacher, these hints seek to have a homiletic note to them as they endeavour to engage the Christian public and not only the academy.<sup>21</sup> Given this homiletic note, it is scripture and the Jesus of scripture which form the principal foci of this endeavour. Throughout the following, it will be necessary to remember that the public and religious lives of people and nations in the ancient world were in many ways inseparable. It is also necessary to remember that thinking of Jesus' dealings with non-Jewish peoples as dealings with proto-institutionalized Christians is anachronistic. While the passages discussed may reflect concerns of early communities rather than reflections on the historical Jesus, Jesus' dealings with non-Jewish people cannot be seen as a making of these people into some form of Christian: we are never told, for example, that Samaritans or pagans who feature in the Gospel accounts ceased to be Samaritans or pagans. Indeed, given that much is made of the later inclusion of the first gentiles in the community (Acts 10; 11.1-17; 15.7-9),<sup>22</sup> one can hardly suppose that the gentiles and Samaritans Jesus came across became integral members of the first community, or proto-Christians during his life.

#### a. Jesus as religious outsider

It is a noticeable theme in John's gospel that Jesus is at times seen not only as an outsider, but more specifically as a religious outsider.<sup>23</sup> This is most curiously evident in a discussion about who the true heirs of Abraham are. Here, Jesus is called a Samaritan (Jn 8.48). It is a noteworthy feature of this story that Jesus, who speaks of God as his Father, is immediately contrasted with those who call Abraham their

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Eugene F. Rogers Jr., 'Supplementing Barth on Jews and Gender: Identifying God by Analogy and Spirit', *Modern Theology*, 14:1 (1998), 43-82.

<sup>19</sup> See Ford, *Christian Wisdom*.

<sup>20</sup> See Charles H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), esp. pp. 25-29.

<sup>21</sup> For further reflection on this, see my 'Preaching inter-faith: finding hints about the religious other from the Good Samaritan', *Epworth Review*, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Wansborough, *The Lion & The Bull: The Gospels of Mark and Luke* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996), pp. 141f.

<sup>23</sup> I am indebted here to discussions with Dr Mark Edwards of the University of Oxford for discussion of these insights.



father: his religious legitimacy as Jewish man is called into question. ‘Abraham is *our* father’ (8:39)<sup>24</sup> and ‘*We* are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone’ (8:33) is the cry from those opposing Jesus. This is heightened all the more in questioning Jesus’ authenticity as an heir of Abraham by referring to him as a Samaritan – even if some form of heir of Abraham, a wrong and wayward heir. Jesus is religiously wrong. These aspects of John’s Gospel (along with themes in Jn chapter 9, especially v.22) have been interpreted in dangerous anti-semitic ways; these tendencies clearly cannot be accepted, and the church must repent of its past in this way. However, the challenge for the Christian in an age of institutionalized Christianity is to see herself as the religious insider (seen typologically at this point in the gospel in terms of the Jewish religious), who sees Jesus not only as an outsider, but as a *religious* outsider. The challenge for the Christian is to remember Jesus not anachronistically as an insider to institutionalized Christianity, but as an outsider to the religious legitimacy of his age, whose claim to Abraham was disputed, and who was seen as a Samaritan. Interestingly, Jesus never challenges this discussion of him as a Samaritan: he only challenges the accusation that he is demon possessed (Jn 8.49). Jesus is one who cannot be captured simply within the bounds of institutional religion of any kind. As Barth puts it: Christ is the ‘the Abolition [*Aufhebung*] of Religion.’<sup>25</sup> In an age in which there is perceived to be much discord between the rival claimant children of Abraham, the Christian tradition is wise in its relations with the other Abrahamic traditions to remember its Lord was once considered an illegitimate Abrahamic heir, and it should, therefore, not be so quick in questioning the legitimacy of claims on Abraham by others.

It does not do justice to centuries of dangerous anti-semitic interpretations of John’s Gospel to pass over these themes so quickly,<sup>26</sup> but space does not allow these issues the consideration they deserve. However, to demonstrate that Jesus is not only a religious outsider in Judea, one does well to consider the response of Samaritans to him, for they, too, see Jesus as a religious outsider: ‘The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”’ (Jews do

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<sup>24</sup> All quotations from the Bible are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> CD I/2 §17. See further, Tom Greggs, ‘Bringing Barth’s Critique of Religion to the Inter-faith Table’, *The Journal of Religion*, 88:1 (2008), 75-94.

<sup>26</sup> For a consideration of some of these issues, see John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 124-159.

not share things in common with Samaritans.)' (Jn 4.9). In Samaria, Jesus is seen as a Jew; in Judea, on one occasion, he is seen as a Samaritan. Institutional religious of his age on different sides see Jesus as a religious outsider. Moreover, it may also be fair to say that in John's Gospel people who are religious outsiders identify with Jesus. Another curious feature of the Johannine account is that in Jerusalem, it is Greeks who wish to see Jesus (Jn 12.20-1). That Jesus was once perceived as a religious outsider and approached by religious outsiders surely challenges the Christians' response to those they themselves perceive as religious outsiders from their own insider perspective today.

#### b. Jesus and the Samaritans

A related theme to this is Jesus' dealings with the Samaritans more generally. The Samaritans were the descendants of the Jews who did not go into exile and were hostile to the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple. Their purity as a people was called into question, and, although they recognized only the first five books of the Jewish scriptures, they did follow Jewish ritual. These issues were focused on the establishment of a rival temple at Mt Gerezim, and the recognition of a different line of priestly descent.<sup>27</sup> Their proximity to and alienation from the Jewish people led to fierce rivalry between the peoples. I wish to contend that Jesus' dealings with Samaritans is significant to the present age of local and international theopolitics. There are several notable features in this.

The first is how Jesus both attends to and teaches about practical, physical human needs in his dealings with Samaritans. In the story of Jesus cleansing the ten lepers in Luke's Gospel, one of the lepers Jesus heals is a Samaritan, and it is he who returns to thank Jesus (Lk. 17.16-19). Jesus attends to the Samaritan's physical needs by curing him of his leprosy. This in itself attends to the Samaritan leper's need for physical human contact with others, which would have been prevented by his disease. A similar issue of attending to the physical needs of the other is seen from the alternative perspective in terms of Jesus asking the Samaritan woman at the well for a

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<sup>27</sup> For more on the Samaritans, see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 378f. & 499-501; and Richard Bauckham, 'The Scrupulous Priest and the Good Samaritan: Jesus' Parabolic Interpretation of the Law of Moses', *New Testament Studies*, 44:4 (1998), 475-489 at 487f.

drink (Jn 4.7). Here, the Samaritan woman is invited to respond to Jesus' thirst, his physical needs, despite his religious otherness. While a spiritual point is made from this, the woman is nevertheless concerned that she cannot attend to Jesus' needs, as she has no bucket and the well is deep (v.10). Physical needs are also pointed to in the famous story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37). Feeling pity for the injured man, the Samaritan tends to his physical needs (v.33): 'He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him' (v.34). Christians are charged in their relation with the religious other to respond with mercy to the physical needs of the religious other, and to recognize the mercy with which others may attend to them.

The second notable feature of Jesus' dealings with Samaritans is in terms of the issue of God. Jesus' attitude as a Jewish man towards the Samaritans, as a disputed Abrahamic people, on this point may speak something to Christians about contemporary issues between Abrahamic peoples. This is not to deny all of the complexity surrounding these types of questions, but to seek hints from the gospels on these themes. In the story of the ten lepers that Jesus heals, Luke recounts:

Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. <sup>16</sup> He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup> Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? <sup>18</sup> Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup> Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." (Lk. 17.15-19)

The Samaritan here is the one who praises God. Despite fears of religious pollution and the rejection of Samaritan cultic practice, there is no question here of the God whom the Samaritan praises: he is not made into a 'proper' Jew before his praise is deemed appropriate. The fact that the Samaritan is religiously other to the remaining nine healed lepers is emphasized in Jesus speaking of him as a 'foreigner' (v.18). Yet, it is this religious other who praises God appropriately. This theme is also picked up in John's Gospel. In the account of the woman at the well, Jesus famously says, referring to the woman's question about the legitimacy of worship on Mt. Gerezim or the Jerusalem temple:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.<sup>22</sup> You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.<sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.<sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 4.21-24)

While Jesus recognizes the woman's religious otherness (v.22), this is in the context of the woman still *worshipping* (albeit that which she does not know). Worship of the God is redefined by God's nature: since God is spirit, God cannot be contained within the bounds of any one temple – 'neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem'. The importance of institutionalized religion is relativized by the very ultimacy of God (v.24).

Thirdly, the Samaritan other is seen as an example to follow. This is clear in the story of the ten lepers (Lk. 17.17f.). However, it is most overt in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus could have told this story in a way that allowed the hero to be a Jewish person who was prepared to place the humanity of another above religious affiliation.<sup>28</sup> He could have done this by making the Samaritan the injured party, and contrasting one Jewish man to the other two. Jesus does not do this. He makes the Samaritan the hero. And what is most shocking is this: Jesus tells his audience to behave like the Samaritan – 'Go and do likewise' (Lk. 10.37). Jesus' audience are commanded to be like the religious other in their ethical behaviour at the cost of ritual and religious purity – the religious contamination of the dead body (Lk. 10.31-32).<sup>29</sup>

### c. Jesus and the Gentiles

A further theme that may be explored is Jesus' interaction with the gentiles. This is clearly not a major part of Jesus' ministry, and such interactions are relatively

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<sup>28</sup> See Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 142.

<sup>29</sup> On ritual purity, see Bauckham, 'The Scrupulous Priest and the Good Samaritan'.

scarce.<sup>30</sup> However, their scarcity is not indicative of a lack of importance. This scarcity may for the contemporary setting, instead, be a reminder of the fact that there is no substantialized *thing* called ‘inter-faith’. Interactions with other religious traditions do not displace particularity, nor should they become the normative expression of religious identity: Christians are and remain Christians; Muslims are and remain Muslims; Sikhs are and remain Sikhs; and so on. From a Christian perspective, the question is not about a reorientation *entirely and exclusively* onto the religious other; the question is about how to understand that religious other in times such as the present of perceived public tensions and difficulties. This does not replace the mission of the church, but leads to the question of how the church is truly to be the church in the world in light of these themes, as but one element of the church’s identity. In this way the Christian should attend to Jesus’ interaction with gentiles as religious others to seek hints from them.

The first feature to note in this is that Jesus does not make the gentiles into Jews, nor even call them out of their present religious particularity: that is clearly not part of Jesus’ mission. The silence of the gospel on this point is worthy of consideration. Jesus does not make the religious other into the correct *homo religiosus* before interacting with him, and it would be wrong to consider Jesus as creating early gentile Christians, especially when one considers the problems surrounding later inclusion of the first gentiles in the community.<sup>31</sup> Even in his reticent dealing with the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7.24-30), Jesus responds to the needs of the gentile woman without denying the religious distinction between her and himself. The problematic nature of Jesus calling her a ‘dog’ cannot easily be brushed aside,<sup>32</sup> and is in itself indicative of the difficulties of inter-faith relations. However, she is never required to become Jewish: Jesus responds to her *as she is*, in her need. There is a place for her, too, in the plan of God, albeit a different one to the place for the preferred Jewish people, and her faith makes her child well.

More positive is Jesus’ dealing with the Roman centurion as recounted in Mt. 8.5-13 and its parallel in Lk. 7.1-10. Responding to the faith that the centurion (no doubt a

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<sup>30</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 219ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Acts 10; 11.1-17; 15.7-9.

<sup>32</sup> See Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991), p. 183.

pagan) places in Jesus' ability to cure his servant, Jesus states: 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 8.10-11). In comparison to the people of his own religion, Jesus praises the faith of this religious other. In an age of pluralism, it does the Christian well to remember the praised faith of this religious other by Jesus when confronted with the piety of the religious others of our own day. Moreover, this act leads Jesus to make a prophetic proclamation that in the kingdom of heaven there will be many who will come to eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. This language from Jesus is surely indicative of a prophetic expectation that there will be feasting alongside the religious other at the *eschaton*: the centurion is no heir of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but he will feast with them.

What one may see, then, in Jesus is an opening up to the otherness of others. Barth put it thus: 'If we see Him, we see with and around Him in ever widening circles His disciples, His people, His enemies and the countless millions who have not yet heard His name. We see Him as theirs, determined by them and for them, belonging to each and every one of them.'<sup>33</sup> For Christians who, in their particularity, seek to follow Christ there exists the necessity of facing the reality of the religious other in the societies in which we live. This is not about ignoring differences or particularity, but it is rather about tending to their needs (and allowing them to tend to ours), recognizing their faith, hoping for a future feast alongside them. It is not about ignoring Christian particularity, but instead following the example of Christ.

## VI. Conclusion

There is much more that could and needs to be said about these themes as they confront religious people in our world today. From the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament, there is scope for reflection on the holy pagans (such as Jethro, Rahab and Melchizadeck), the lack of hospitality shown to Israel from foreign nations, the exile, and the commands regarding the strangers in the land. However, to illustrate the need for particularity and exclusivity in approaching the reasons for inter-faith

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<sup>33</sup> CD III/2, p. 216.

dialogue, this article has looked only to the New Testament, which is exclusively and uniquely Christian. It is not the place for the Christian to give the reasons why a Jewish person might wish to engage in dialogue with them, nor for that matter why any member of any other tradition should. It is, instead, the place of the Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist to reflect on these questions and look deep within their traditions themselves.

These issues are deeply complex. They belong to the individual traditions, and – in an age of reputed conflict – to the public arena. They need to be faced in recognition of the dual aspect of the issues – from inside church, temple, mosque and synagogue, alongside from the perspective of community cohesion, education policy, human rights issues and international relations. These are issues that need to be preached and considered internal to communities, as communities seek to discover their place in the public sphere.

What has been attempted in this article is to forward a programmatic agenda for faith communities to consider why, for their own self-identity, it might be both legitimate and necessary to engage positively with the religious other. This has been done with an illustration of how the issues might be faced by one individual community in the hope that members of different communities might also continue to consider these themes. Attempts at dealing with the issues highlighted in this paper will need to be done with attentiveness to the full complexity of human living. However complex, it is incumbent on faiths to do this if they are to be seen neither as things to be ‘smuggled into some last secret place’,<sup>34</sup> nor as forces for division or clashes of absolutes, but as forces for the good, coexisting alongside one another, in the healing of communities and the world.

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<sup>34</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971), p. 346.